The Hope of Christmas Isaiah 60:1-7 December 20, 1964

Things could hardly have been more dismal for Judah. The People of God had been divided into two separate states, Israel to the North and Judah to the South. Israel had fallen and for years the tiny Kingdom of Judah, in the midst of a great international power struggle was all that remained of the chosen nation of the Lord. At the mercy of a number of powerful military machines, Judah stood alone. But then Judah entered into Then Judah's turn came. An alliance with Egypt, and incurred the wrath of Babylon; the Babylonian armies swooped down upon the helpless state, and with relative ease crushed its defences and leveled the city of Jerusalem. But again, the Jews had survived military conquest in the past. A temporary set-back could hardly interrupt the divinley ordained history of God's own nation. The Babylonians, however, had other thoughts, . The thorn of Judah had pricked long enough. This time there would be nothing left: the Babylonians would see that the Jews, as a nation and as a race, were extinct. A diabolical scheme evolved. I'm sure you know the story. The conquerers carried off to Babylon, the cream of Judah's culture. Lawyers, Doctors, Priests, Artisans, everyone of stature was removed and relocated in Babylon in exile. It was a good plan. The forces of cultural assimilation would be irrestistable, and in a generation or two the Jews would be completely absorbed: Judah would be gone forever.

The years passed and the Babylonian strategy was paying dividends. The Prophet Jeremiah had advised the exiles to settle down in Babylon and make the best of the unfortunate situation. As time passed a new generation rose up, a generation that of Jews that had never set foot on the promised land; a generation that had never worshipped in the Temple: a generation that soon would have no reason, no motive for retaining its identity as the people of God. The nation, the culture, the tradition of Israel were perched on the edge of extinction.

This is the dismal historical background to our Old Testament Lesson scriptire reading this morning. Against the harsh reality of the situation, the opening words: "Arise, Shine, for your light has come" sound pathetically naive. The man who wrote these words was in Jerusalem: in all probability, a young man who had grown up after the tragic exile.

Where in the world did he find the rationale to advise a nation about to be annihilated to Arise and Shine? What light could he possibly mean? If ever there was a time of utter and absolute darkness, this was it!

And yet, the whole of this man's writing, from chapter 40 to the end of the book, is undergirded by a strong hope in the future. His introductory words in Chapter 40: "Be comforted, be comforted, my people, says your God" set the temper, and it is one of thorough-going hope and optimism. He speaks confidently of a return; a remnant of the faithful returning to Jerusalem; he speaks of God's purpose at work in history — even the tragic present history: he interprets the suffering as Judah's service to God. Actually he is a realist: our scripture reading revealed his assessment of the present: "For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples." In metaphor he likened Judah to a woman, lying prostrate in the dirt. A woman violated, oppressed, widowed - this is no sentimentalist. And to this woman he addresses his stirring words: "Arise, Shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. Lift up your eyes and see, they all gather together, they come to you, your sons and daughters." In the face of indisputable ~~pessimism~~ tragedy, here was a man who had hope. And why? Simply because he believed in God: a God who was faithful: A God who was truly God in that he was the Lord of history. No matter what happened; no matter the present condition, God was still in control. This is why the author could bring optimism and hope to a beleaguered nation of exiles; and it is precisely this trust in a faithful God who picks up the shattered pieces of history and fits them together again for his own purposes that accounts for the existence of Israel today.

On this fourth Sunday of Advent I would like to suggest that the birth of Jesus Christ is the final testimony to the validity of the writer's hope. Of all the meanings men and cultures have given the nativity, it is this one of hope and optimism that I want to hold up before you this morning. Further I want to suggest that humanity, and that includes you and me, needs today, December 20, 1964, that hope in the future as it has never needed it before.

The exiled Jews in Babylon had no monopoly on dispair and pessimism. It is in the air today. Dispair and anxiety because of the hand history has dealt us hang like a pall over all of life. I beleive that many people, many of us, have abandoned the giddy optimism that is part and parcel of our faith. The future looks so bad that we refuse to let it interupt our fettish with the present. On the surface, it appears that we despair for good reason.

A week or so ago I received notice that I must renew my licence to operate an automobile in Indiana. Included with the forms and applications was an interesting little document printed by the office of Civil Defence and the Bureau of Public Roads. I assume all of you received it also. Its title is "Highway Signs for Survival". It informed me that I will need to know a few highway signs in the event of a national emergency. Then, in case I didn't understand the nature of this "national emergency" the document cryptically informed me that "As soon as possible after a nuclear attack, the following black and white road signs will be erected." I was baothered a bit by the finality of this "AS soon as"; it would be a little more comfortable to read "in case of", at least there would be some possibiltiy that it wasn't going to happen.

Now, lest I incur the wrath of someone who thinks that our salvation lies in the hands of this type of thing, let me say I am not opposed to Civil Defence per se. But I do question the validity of this type of exercise. I am not hesitant to hazard the guess that most of you didn't read the inclosure, and if you did, you threw it away. Assuming I did file it at hand, and a nuclear attack did occur, and I was able to evacuate, and I remebered having received the pamplet in December of 1964, I am sure i would be unable to find it.

I've yielded to the temptation to have a little fun with this document. Now I present it as exhibit A to prove the existence of a sickness in our midst called dispair or pessimism or hoplessness. What really bothers me about this, and Civil Defence in general, is the finality and confidence with which its devotees describe the holocaust around the corner. If they were taken seriously, we could be nothing other than absolute pseeimists, filing away our escape instructions while digging our fall-out shlters. I see in this document another chronicle of anxiety, an illustration of a mentality that pervades the very air we breathe.

Scholars, philosophers, poets, novelists too have measured the signs of the times. And they too have badgered us with a philosophy of despair. The literary and artistic hall-mark of our age is a school of meaninglessness. Under the guise of realism, men of letters cry that God is dead, that life is absurd, that existence has ne meaning; that man has no hope. Emil Zola, some years ago likened human history to a train hurtling through the dark. The track is fate, the freight is humanity, the engineer is God, who is dead. " If Zola was right, we can alter the metaphor and say that around the next turn the bridge is out — the inevitable World War III.

Contemporary history is not very encouraging. It seems that the best efforts of honorable men today are covevred over by violence and cynicism. As a nation we find ourselves scorned for doing what we know is right. Our every act is misinterpreted - from the Far East to the Congo to NATO. Instead of being loved as defenders of the peace, our embassies are strewn with ugly slogans and our libraries burned. If we look at contemporary evebts in the light of past history, any ray of hope is even more remote. I've just begun reading a current survey of history entitled "The Rise of the West", and it doesn't take long, when looking at the totality of the human story, to realize that by and large human history is simply an account of wars and the periods between wars when men recupperated and prepared to have at it again. Arnold Toynbee, discussing possible progress in civilization concluded that, "There is no reason to expect any change in unredeemed human nature." That is to say, mankind has become knowledgeable and sophisticated: but his disposition toward war and destruction is no different today than it ever was.

The historical anxiety of our day is complemented by a moral dispair. In our day we have seen the crumbling of the puritain ethic. The legalistic view of religion and morality molded into our culture by the Puritains has given way. The walls have come tumbling down and we have put nothing up in thier place. ~~Teen agers~~ Young People today live in a moral vacumm we have created: too mature academically to buy the old "don't smoke don't dance" ethic, they look to the adult world. What they see is a culture that is amoral: not immoral, simply amoral, without any commonly accepted standard of morality. And so our dispair at our historical plight is increased by a very real abd personal dispair, that right is no longer right, and wrong is no longer wrong.

Along with these two, we must cope with the natural despair that is inherent with man, - the despair of death. We all fear death, we all try to make some sense out of life, in light of its inevitable termination. But answers are not easy. Science and technology has given us the ability to touch the moon, but not to extend life, or even to prolong it significantly. A young man dies, and we find ourselves with a new sense of our own frailty. With Alfren Lord Tennyson we agree: "However we brave it out, we men are a little bred.

The Jews in Babylon had good reason to despair. But when we take a long and honest look at our own situation, we find ourselves running a close second. Reality appears too brutal to afford us the luxury of hope and optimism. And so we do one of two things: we can take one of the easily accessible escape routes away from reality: alcoholism, certain types of religion, the gimmick of Positive Thinking: anything to get us away from the futility of the present. Or perhaps we try to be realists, looking squarely into the face of the pres situation, finding no room for hope, and becoming hopelessly pessimistic.

There is however, a third option: the option expressed in "Arise, Shine, for your light has come." There is the option of confident hope. It is not a naive sentimentalism that thrives on illussions and pretending. Rather this hope looke reality in the face, however harsh, however distatseful, and comes away smiling. For this option sees moret than immedi histpry: like the prophet of old this option looks at the present situation, whatever it is, and through it and in it and over it sees the hand of God. There is nothing history can do to dull the optimism of this option, for it is based on a faith in a God who is Lord of History. There is nothing in life that can quash that hope this hope, for it is based on the faith that God can take all the exigencies of life and weave them together in an orderly pattern.

And where do we find justification for such hope/? Where is the proof? The justificati the proof, is none other than the humble event we celebrate this Friday. We have a third option, we can afford to be confident because Jesus Christ was born. The prophet held out a glimmer of hope to the captives because he, and they, believed ina God who could and would use the human situation for his own purposes. They had faith in an "Almighty" God.

In Bethlehem of Judea we have seen that God act, we have heard him speak a word so eloquent that even the forces of history have been unable to drown it out.

The Hebrews believed that God was love. We have seen that love in the coming of Jesus Christ into the world. The Hebrews believed that God was present in life, in history, in their culture. But we have seen God invade the realm of human life in the birth of a baby. The Hebrews believed that God was the Lord, even of death. But we have seen that Lordship in the miracle of the Resurrection, and the continuing presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church.

The birth of Jesus Christ means many things to many men. But over and above all else, it means that God cares about the World: that his love is infinite: that his hand is the strongest in History.

If we live in the darkness of despair, it is because we have failed to see the light God has shone into our existence/ If we live without hope, it is because we have never really comprehended what it means to say - ("Joy to the World, the Lord has Come".)

To the exiles, 500 years before Christ, the prophet said, "Arise, Shine, for your light has come: because it has, we can afford to Arise and Shine, to have hope and confidence. Symbolically that light shines over the darkness, the light of a star, announcing that Jesus Christ was born. Amen